

Fathom's distinct international vision of e-knowledge is creating a truly global learning community in which people are able to explore the world's top knowledge resources throughout the course of their lives.

# Knowledge in depth

**F**athom is a centre for online knowledge from some of the world's leading universities, libraries, museums and research institutes.

Imagine being able to spend a day finding out about your special interest, say political history, by first visiting the British Library. There you find out a certain central character has a connection with the US so you visit New York Public Library to find out more. But you want more details about this person, how their ideas developed, in what historical context, so you turn to Cambridge University Press for a book to read. What you would really like though is an expert, a knowledgeable academic, to explain exactly what significance this person had, and why their ideas were ground-breaking. Where else would you go but LSE?

Fathom brings the internet full circle by taking you right inside the world's major thought capitals. Fathom's website offers unprecedented opportunities for discovery through authenticated free content, as well as related knowledge and education e-commerce opportunities, overseen by an advisory board selected from its partners. Its intellectual content is distinguished from most internet sites by its rigour, sophistication and roots within the scholarly community.

Who established Fathom? Founding partners are LSE, Columbia University, Cambridge University Press, The British Library and the New York Public Library. Since the first public announcement of our start up in April, to our great pleasure other knowledge providers have come on board and our full list of partners now also includes: The University of Chicago; American Film Institute; RAND; Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution; The Natural History Museum, London; Victoria and Albert Museum, London; and The Science Museum, London.

What will you find on the site? A typical Fathom feature is an introduction to a topic in the form of a lecture, article, interview, collection, performance, interactive multimedia presentation, audio slideshow or website. Alongside the content, the academic author will recommend books, journals, documents and eLearning and eKnowledge products that allow the user to explore the subject in greater depth.

No Fathom content exists in isolation. Every story (assemblage of content objects) is a part of a small scale organisational structure called a trail: each trail is a collection of five to 15 stories, organised thematically. Stories sit on multiple trails. Any given story is at all times, therefore, a node that the Fathom visitor can pivot on to explore a whole new theme or subject.

As Fathom aspires to become the leading destination on the internet for authenticated knowledge, quality assurance is the most important consideration in every activity.

To this end, academic curators and researchers at Fathom institutions generate all content. In addition, all content is overseen and evaluated by an Academic Council, which includes members from each Fathom institution and is currently chaired by Jonathan R Cole, provost of Columbia University. Pro-director Professor Stephen Hill represents LSE. Moreover, the Academic Council oversees all of Fathom's other public activities, including ensuring that products recommended on the Fathom site meet the same high standards of quality as are applied to Fathom's content.

In the past six months Fathom has set up a three-person production team working within the School's commercial company Enterprise LSE. The team now has its own TV and multi-media studio, with edit suite facilities and a mini DV location camera kit for recording activities around the School. With

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the help of LSE academic staff, the team has already created around 50 multimedia articles for launch, with a further 40 in development. These stories may be image rich, video rich, contain audio or be just plain text. Most of all, these stories reflect the high level of research, lectures and teaching activity of the School. So far contributions include:

- multi-media discussions about globalisation, featuring Anthony Giddens, Meghnad Desai, John Gray and Mary Kaldor
- video interviews and lectures on British history and the British empire, featuring Linda Colley, David Landes and Dominic Lieven
- video and audio lectures by Fred Halliday on the World at 2000 (Macmillan Press, 2000)
- a selection of animated text articles by Henrietta Moore, Leslie Sklair and Richard Rogers using the web animation tool 'Flash' to its best advantage
- a debate about the nature of social science in academia today.

How do we make money? A considerable amount of Fathom content is available free of charge. Fathom also markets knowledge products and services for which institutions charge, for example, online courses and books, with Fathom receiving a commission on all these commercial transactions.

And who will be our users? People who love to delve into new ideas, who take pleasure in a discussion, even if it gets heated, people who were born to live in the knowledge economy.

Also those people who see an item on the news and want to find out more but are tired of internet searches which bring up 20,347 different kinds of nonsense. People who may have private passions for art history or palaeontology outside of their careers. Or people who have recently retired and can now spend more time delving into subjects they have never before had the opportunity to discover.

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Fathom's distinct international vision of e-knowledge is creating a truly global learning community in which people are able to explore the world's top knowledge resources throughout the course of their lives. The partners will make available content which showcases some of the leading cultural and scientific achievements in British and US history, and which has never been accessible in a single location nor outside of the walls of the individual institutions.

We hope people will use Fathom and participate in this new world of knowledge and ideas because it is good for their soul as well as their career, and also because, through the internet, for the first time they can. ■



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